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In Memoriam

Vitali Silitski and His Input to Political Science
A year ago, on the 11th of June 2011 the renowned Belarusian political scientist, blogger and civic activist Vitali Silitski passed away after a long battle with cancer. But after himself he has left numerous academic and analytical articles, several books and a great number of ideas which he unfortunately had no possibility to complete......P.3

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Minsk's Ў Gallery hosted a memorial evening for the first BISS Director Vitali Silitski on the day of the obit, 11 June. Vitali's friends and colleagues shared their memories of the globally renowned political researcher in a very warm atmosphere.

Main News

On 5 June, Filip Kaczmarek (EPP, Poland) was elected new chair of the European Parliament's delegation for relations with Belarus. He replaces Jacek Protasiewicz, who is taking up his new duties as vice-president of the European Parliament. EU relations with Belarus have never been easy and official political cooperation has gone from bad to worse since the presidential elections of 2010. "Our task in the coming months will be to support the development of democratic civil society, including groups and independent media, where the situation continues to deteriorate", said Kaczmarek. During the first meeting chaired by Mr Kaczmarek, members of the delegation unanimously adopted a proposal to submit Ales Bialiatski, a prominent Belarusian human rights defender chairman of the Human Rights Centre Viasna, as a candidate for the Nobel Peace Prize.

On 31 May, Russian President Vladimir Putin visited Belarus on his first trip abroad since taking office. "The very fact that my first foreign visit is to brotherly Belarus certainly reflects the special nature of our relationship," Putin said. During his visit Putin offered Minsk new loans and solidarity in the face of Western sanctions and confirmed that Belarus would receive the third instalment of a $3 billion (2.4 billion euro) loan from last year. The Russian and Belarusian presidents also discussed plans to construct a nuclear power plant in the country. Belarus and Russia have experienced problematic relations in the last three to four years. A chill developed in 2008 when Lukashenka refused to recognise the independence of former Georgian republics, South Ossetia and Abkhazia. That was followed by a series of contractual price rows over gas and milk, as well as transit prices for Russian goods travelling to the EU through Belarus.

Belarusian authorities increased pressure on civil society activists over the last few weeks by issuing warnings and conducting administrative arrests, including the detention of Alexei Pikulik, the academic director of the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies who was sentenced to 5 days of imprisonment on the charge of "hooliganism". Activist of the Govori Pravdu (Tell the Truth) campaign Mikhas Pashkevich received 7 days following his arrest after a meeting with local activists and journalists in the Homel Region. In Hrodna, the police cracked down on the picket staged in protest against the planned introduction of a Russian-language stream within a school attended by ethnic Poles. Some 20 people were arrested during the protest. At least nine of them were charged with participation in an unauthorised mass event. Some 260 parents of children who attend the school have signed a petition against the introduction of the Russian-language stream.

In April, the currency payments deficit amounted to $44.9 million, while in March it was $62.6 million. In February, the balance of FX payments was positive at $116.9 million, while in January it was $130.6 million. The surplus of foreign currency payments reached $139.9 million in January-April taking into account transfers on oil products to Russia's budget of the export duties. The receipt of FX earnings totalled $17.28 billion YTD, which is 33.9% more over the same period in 2011. Payments for imports amounted to $15.66 billion (an increase of 10%), taking into account payments on oil duties to the Russian budget - $17.14 billion. The surplus of foreign currency payments for January-April reached $1.61 billion (excluding oil duties), whereas the year before it was negative, amounting to $1.33 billion.

Editorial

This issue of Belarus Headlines commemorates the one year anniversary of prominent Belarusian political scholar Vitali Silitski's passing. Dr Silitski served as academic director of BISS and left a profound legacy for Belarusian political science.

In this issue Belarusian and Western experts share their memories of Vitali as a person and reflect on the relevance of his works today.

Dzianis Melyantsou provides an overview of Vitali Silitski's legacy and specifically looks into the concept of pre-emption as a strategic tool employed by autocracies to maintain their rule via manufactured consent.

Dr Alastair Rabagliati highlights the relevance of Vitali's writings on the value of opposition participation in fraudulent elections. He agrees with Vitali's conclusion that the opposition should participate in the elections and to use them as an opportunity to reach the Belarusian population. Matt Rojansky of Carnegie Endowment for International Peace reflects on valuable perspectives offered by Vitali's idea of pre-emtive authoritarianism. David Marples shares Vitali's view that Belarus is less monolithic than most foreign media outlets seem to think.

Russian President Vladimir Putin's visit to Belarus became the most important recent foreign policy event in Belarus. Putin's first foreign trip outside of Russia has an important symbolic meaning for him because he hopes to further develop his idea of the Eurasian Economic Community. Russia and Belarus also reached an agreement to begin financing the construction of a controversial nuclear power plant in Belarus. At the same time, the Belarusian authorities increased pressure on civil society activists over the last few weeks by issuing warnings and conducting administrative arrests, including the detention of Alexei Pikulik, academic director of the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies.

Belarus Headlines also covers the recently established "Clearing House" Initiative and "EU and Belarus: Sharing Knowledge" projects. The projects, in which Office for Democratic Belarus plays a key role, aim to build the organisational capacity of Belarusian civil society organisations and enhance their


Olga Stuzhinskaya


Tatiana Kouzina


Yaraslau Kryvoi

cooperation. The initiatives also aim to improve coordination among Belarusian civil society, the European Union, European donors and international implementers.

Siarhei Bohdan's article is on the recent developments in the Belarusian army. He notes that unlike the security agencies or police, the army itself is not Lukashenka's reliable ally. The army is unlikely to play a role in a political transition and it has never done so. But its personnel are an untapped source of support for change.

The issue also includes summaries of the most interesting publications which appeared on Belarus Digest. They give valuable insights into the nature of the Belarusian regime, how Belarus is trying to play the EU border security card, why the Belarusian opposition should take a more proactive role inside the country and the role of Belarus in the World War II, which is often forgotten in the West.

In the Unknown Belarus section Olga Loginova writes on her visit to the Saint Elisei Lavra Abode in the Hrodna Region, hidden from the rest of the world by impenetrable woods and swamps.

Please, enjoy reading this issue of the Belarus Headlines and feel free to get back to us with your feedback.

Co-editors:
Olga Stuzhinskaya, director of the Office for a Democratic Belarus
Tatiana Kouzina, executive director of the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies
Yaraslau Kryvoi, editor-in-chief of Belarus Digest

News in Short

Russia and Belarus reached an agreement to begin financing the construction of a nuclear power plant in Belarus. Russia will give Belarus $200 million for the first stage of construction, Interfax reported, citing Sergei Kirienko, chief executive officer of Rosatom Corporation. The $10-billion plant will be built by the Atomstroyexport company, a Rosatom subsidiary. The plant will consist of two reactors with a capacity of 1,200 MW each and will boost the capacity of the entire Belarusian energy system to 8,000 MW. The first unit of the power station is due to be ready in 2017, with the second in 2018. The nuclear plant will be situated in the Astravets district, Hrodna region, some 10 miles from the Lithuanian border. The spent fuel from the nuclear plant is supposed to be sent back to a special storage facility in Russia. The general contract on the NPP construction is expected to be signed on June 17.

The National Bank of Belarus (NBB) plans to reduce the refinancing rate by 1-2%. According to the NBB, it will be possible to raise the question about a specific reduction of the refinancing rate after receiving the statistics on inflation in May. The National Bank has thrice reduced the refinancing rate since early 2012. On February 15, it was reduced for the first time from 45% to 43% per annum, while the second time occurred on March 1, from 43% to 38% per annum. On April 2, it lowered the refinancing rate from 38 to 36% per annum for the third time. Meanwhile, the Belarusian authorities are planning to lower the refinancing rate to 20-23% by the end of the year.

In late May, the demand for currency in Belarus slightly prevailed over supply. This was connected to the repayment of loans by economic entities, as well as the preparation of Belarusians for the summer holidays. In the last week of May the basket of foreign currencies slightly weakened and the population remained net sellers of hard currencies.

On May 30, the dollar rate increased by Br110 to Br8.350, while on May 31 – by another Br60. According to the NBB, the ruble generally appreciated by 1.7% against a basket of foreign currencies in May. Economist Siarhei Chaly believes that in order to see the correct picture, one should consider the cost of the basket of currencies. The expert also notes that the trend of the ruble's weakening would help to reduce some excess liquidity in the financial market of Belarus.

Three Belarusians along with one Russian and 19 Ukrainians were sentenced to 10 years of imprisonment by a Libyan military court. Another Russian citizen received a life-term for being recognised as the coordinator of the group. The men were accused by Libya's new authorities of having helped renovate military equipment used during the conflict between Qaddafi's forces and NATO-backed opposition fighters last year. Spokesman for the Belarusian Foreign Ministry, Andrei Savinykh said that Belarus was using all possible political and legal opportunities for the review of the sentence against Belarusians in Libya.

In Memoriam

Vitali Silitski and His Input to Political Science

By Dzianis Melyantsou


Photo by BISS.

A year ago, on the 11th of June 2011 the renowned Belarusian political scientist, blogger and civic activist Vitali Silitski passed away after a long battle with cancer. But after himself he has left numerous academic and analytical articles, several books and a great number of ideas which he unfortunately had no possibility to complete.

Vilali graduated from the Belarusian State University (department of Philosophy and Economy, programme in Sociology) in 1994. He holds M.A. in Politics (Central European University, Hungary) and PhD in Political Science from Rutgers University. With such brilliant education Dr. Silitski could have built a successful career in the USA or Europe but he preferred to return to Belarus and work there to promote western standards of research and analysis in his home country.

In 1999-2003 he worked as an associate professor at the European Humanities Univerisity in Minsk. The EHU was the flagship center to bring European academic standards to the Belarusian academic community. Nevertheless Vitali lost his position when the university administration took orders from the authorities to punish him for publicly criticizing the government of President Lukashenka. Afterwards he was a Reagan-Fascell Democracy fellow at the National Endowment for Democracy in Washington D.C. and visiting scholar at the Center on Democracy, Development, and the Rule of Law at Stanford University.

In 2007 Vitali was appointed director of the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies (BISS) and ran the Institute until his tragic death in 2011. Thanks to Vitali Silitski, his energy and dedication BISS soon became one of the leading Belarusian think-tanks working in the field of political research and public policy.

Silitski's research interests embraced not only Belarus's domestic politics and economy, but he also has made a significant input into political science as a discipline; he developed the concept of pre-emptive authoritarianism to explain how post-Soviet regimes prevented the democratic transformations associated with the color revolutions in Serbia, Georgia and Ukraine. According to Vitali, the strategy was to suppress any emerging opposition forces before they were able to use the relatively liberal environment of competitive authoritarianism:

“Preemption aims at political parties and players that are still weak. It removes from the political arena even those opposition leaders who are unlikely to pose a serious challenge in the next election. It attacks the independent press even if it reaches only small segments of the population. It destroys civil society organizations even when these are concentrated in a relatively circumscribed urban subculture. Last but not least, it violates the electoral rules even when the incumbent would be likely to win in a fair balloting.

Although these actions may destroy the regime's democratic image abroad, the public at home may still perceive its leaders to be duly, if not fully democratically, elected. By uprooting political and social alternatives well before they develop into threats, incumbents can win elections long before the start of the campaign. And the validity of their victory is less likely to be contested when the strongest challengers have already been denied entry into the race by disqualification or other more nefarious means. Preemption has an enormous psychological impact on both the political and social opposition; such systematized repression instills in them a sense of hopelessness and imposes the perception that political change is far beyond reach.”

Vitali Silitski underlined that it was Vladimir Putin's Russia that pioneered this strategy. He argued that the Kremlin initiated measures “not only to discredit and demoralize the opposition with hostile propaganda, but also to strip it of anything like a level playing field and, when necessary, to remove it physically from the scene. This last goal may be pursued by simply disqualifying opposition figures from running for office, but also by jailing them, forcing them into exile, or even, in extreme cases, murdering them” (1).

Pre-emption is only one of the three major tools that autocracies employ to maintain their rule via manufactured consent, Silitski wrote. Across the post-Soviet arena, regimes also exploit resource-based revenues to purchase consent and employ dirty political technology – disinformation and propaganda campaigns to discredit opponents before they even enter the electoral arena – in a strategy that provides revealing insight into the ruling elites' political mentality:

In the minds of those who run the Kremlin, this is nothing to be ashamed of: They simply cannot imagine a political system working differently. In their view, the spontaneity that one seems to observe in Western democracies is a product of the same elite consensus and fixing, through which outsiders are marginalized. Western rhetoric about democracy and the rule of law is spurned as a cynical attempt to open up political space for outsiders who enjoy foreign backing (2).

According to political scientist Lukan Way (University of Toronto), Vitali Silitski was among the first to put authoritarian regimes in the international context (3). Many in the 1990s and the early 2000s wrote about democratic diffusion, but Vitali started a discussion about counter-diffusion. In a sense he created a new research agenda on the spread of authoritarianism. One of his concepts was what he called the authoritarian international - basically efforts to respond to external challenges by increasing coordination among non-democratic states. This concept is very actual today, when we analyze the process of emerging of the Eurasian Union announced by Putin last year.

While much of his work was focused on the post-Soviet space, a region which has proved to be largely inhospitable terrain for democratic transitions, Silitski maintained a stance of cautious optimism that nevertheless rejected simplistic notions of democracy emerging from abrupt regime change or externally-driven political engineering.

“The project of promoting democracy is as complex as the world in which it must thrive, and it requires an intelligent and long-term effort that cannot be expected to be equally successful everywhere and at once,” he insisted (4).

Co-author of The A to Z of Belarus and The Political Trends in the New Eastern Europe: Ukraine and Belarus, author of the Historical Dictionary of Belarus, and the Postponed Freedom (5) Vitali Silitski also produced over 100 publications on issues of democratisation and authoritarianism in the former Soviet space, electoral revolutions, preemptive authoritarianism, EU relations with Belarus, and Belarus-Russia integration. He was a frequent contributor to the Journal of Democracy, the European Voice, ARCHE and many other periodicals. Vitali was an active, debate provoking and ironic blogger as well as a dedicated democratic activist and an enormously engaging person.

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1. Vitali Silitski, “Tools of Autocracy”, Journal of Democracy Volume 20, Number 2, April 2009 pp. 42-46.
2. Ibidem.
3. Andrew Kuchins, Cory Welt, Mitchell Orenstein, Lucan Way, Rodger Potocki, “Vitali Silitski (1972-2011)”, Journal of Democracy Volume 23, Number 1, January 2012 pp. 188-189.
4. Vitali Silitski, “The Quintessential Dissident”, Journal of Democracy Volume 16, Number 3, July 2005 pp. 170-174.
5. It was published in 2012 in Belarusian.

Comments

In this section we offer for your attention a few abstracts from Vitali Silitski's works followed by comments suggested by different experts.

Do We Need to Take Part in Fraudulent Elections?

Why do dictators lose? The answer is on the surface. They lose due to the very same reasons that any leader or government loses votes in fair elections. When society is dissatisfied with the situation in a country it will look for an alternative. When society undergoes dramatic changes (e.g. in Asian countries it was a result of economic growth), and new social groups and interests come into existence, there is a growing need for new representative institutions. It is a need dictatorships cannot meet. The political regime that is unable to fulfill its promises to the people loses its legitimacy. (NB: in this case legitimacy is considered a sociological term, which means a public consent to an established political system, and the readiness to live according to the rules dictated by the authorities).

In this case it is extremely important for the opposition to offer a viable alternative to this unpopular authority. This is why, first of all, the opposition should participate in the elections; second of all, their political program should be more appealing to the people than the status quo imposed by authoritarian leaders. Finally, the opposition should make clear to the public that participating in the a priori fraudulent elections can still bring about changes.

In other words, society should learn that the opposition can win more votes than the authorities are able to falsify.

Vitali Silitski. Elections in authoritarian regimes – a farce or a chance for a change?// / Open Society 2001, info-analytical handbook, N1(10) (http://www.data.minsk.by/opensociety/1.01/9.html))

Dr. Alastair Rabagliati, Independent Political Analyst



In 2001, in the aftermath of the 2000 Parliamentary elections, Vitali Silitski posed a question which is perhaps even more valid for Belarus today than it was at the time - should an opposition participate in an election organised by an authoritarian regime. Indeed the contemporary relevance of this article was highlighted when Belarus Partisan re-ran it on its website earlier this year.

Although time has passed, many of the conclusions that Silitski reached remain to be taken on board by many of those opposing Lukashenka. He argued that elections give the opposition an opportunity to promote themselves and expand their political base. He pointed out that even a moderately successful election held in difficult conditions can initiate a process of liberalisation which can enhance the prospects of more substantial change at a later date. Yet, as we look ahead to the September 2012 elections the opposition is split into three groups - those boycotting, those running and those planning to withdraw on the eve of polling - and few have faith in any breakthrough from the status quo.

In his article, Silitski identifies a series of countries where there were transformational elections. Since this time, the colour revolutions in Ukraine and Georgia and also the recent opening in Burma provide additional examples for reflection. A key contrast with Belarus remains clear though. In these countries the opposition was widely respected with an iconic leader. In Belarus, the focus of many activists is to prevent a rival attaining or maintaining such a status. As a group, they are unable to cast off the negative propaganda of the regime and gain wider support.

Silitski recognised that elections put on by authoritarian regimes have the character of a propaganda show, and are run with the aim of legitimising the regime. It is entirely understandable that worn down opposition activists do not wish to participate in an unfair contest where their opponent makes up the rules as they goes along. Ultimately, though, as Silitski pointed out, change can only come when rival groupings focus on presenting a political programme more appealing to the people than the authoritarian status quo. This is the challenge that prospective leaders in Belarus need to rise to.

Aliaksandr Klaskouski, Belarusian Independent Political Analyst



Vital Silitski wrote this text in 2001, but it feels like it was only yesterday. On the eve of the 2012 Parliamentary campaign, the opposition is again divided by the controversy of participating in the de facto fraudulent elections.
The worst thing is that political culture per se is non-existent. Representatives of different political groups cast their opponents as traitors. They literally fight each other. Demagogues go on with their fruitless yet heated talks, since they know that big words can be more appealing for the masses than the position of an educated realist, for whom politics is the art of the possible.

Vitali Silitski's article is exemplary, because in it the position of the author is supported by strong reasoning, not bias or excessive emotions. He incorporates the Belarusian situation into an international context, and finds its place within the dynamics of global historical processes. Accordingly, it becomes evident that the darkness that Belarus faces right now is not fatal, and we are not doomed to endure it. Those who want to live in a different, free and European Belarus should calmly and decisively continue their mission. As Vitali Silitski once said, we need to remember that dictatorships disappear.

On Pre-emtive Authoritarianism

The proposition of the sultanate character of Lukashenka's ruling model was supported by the discussions of its pre-emtive character. In other words, the administration eradicates all conditions which could lead to any substantial resistance, even before these conditions can be considered a danger to its authority.

The rigid authoritarian regime has prevailed because it has monitored the collapses and transformations of its more liberal neighbors, drawn conclusions and subsequently destroyed any seeds of opposition in the country, even when the opposition was harmless.

Under these conditions, any suggestions of liberalising the system, even when intended to bring about short-time benefits, were considered attempts to undermine the system and as such immediately declined.

(V. Silitski 'The Draft of the Regime Salvation' 2009)

Lucan Way, Associate Professor of Political Science University of Toronto

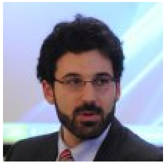


Vitali's writing is as thought provoking now as it was when it was first published. But I think his message in this passage is a bit more pessimistic than is warranted. Above all, the Arab spring -- while it has not necessarily brought democracy to that region -- has demonstrated the possibility for sudden and massive protest even in highly authoritarian countries where opposition was assumed to be quiescent. Highly closed regimes in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria, and Bahrain witnessed the emergence of "leaderless protests" in which massive numbers people catalyzed by new information technologies mobilised in unprecedented numbers. These protests were "leaderless" in the sense that they were not orchestrated or led by any well established opposition leader or well institutionalised opposition movement. In Egypt for example, the protests initially took place without the extensive participation of the well-established Muslim Brotherhood. If this did not inspire paranoia in Lukashenka, nothing will.

At the same time, the Arab spring demonstrates that leaderless protests are no long term substitute for a well established civil society. Thus, in these countries, autocrats have been able to quickly reestablish themselves.

Comments

Matt Rojansky, "Russia and Eurasia Program, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace"



Vitali's idea of pre-emtive authoritarianism is both deeply rooted in longstanding post-soviet realities and yet still presents a fresh and valuable perspective on a persistent problem for western policy towards the region and towards Belarus in particular. The authorities in such states have been effective not only by virtue of their iron fisted "prevention," but in leveraging all the tools of state power to carve out political domination at the expense of political rivals. They have, for example, helped sustain and even deepen a soviet-era view of public protest or mass demonstration as a sign of disorder an thus danger for national life. Through coercive means and by coopting elites, the authorities have succeeded in associating the concepts of efficacy and exclusivity of political power in the public consciousness. Thus, those who campaign against the ruling authorities can be successfully maligned as opponents of the system as a whole, as threats to good order and discipline, and ultimately as "enemies of the state." It should be long remembered and appreciated that the sharp analysis Vitali spearheaded at BISS and that continues thanks to his legacy, has helped to distinguish between the values of the ruling political forces and the interests of the state and the nation as a whole. This is an essential step towards real pluralism and prosperity in the future.

How Can the European Union Help in the Liberalisation of Belarus?

In the present political environment, when changes cannot be initiated, it remains difficult to discuss the participation of opposition forces in the political life of the country, not to mention their transformation into an 'agent of change' without the restoration of a legal structure for competition. Alternative political forces and independent society need to seek out possibilities to utilise clandestine processes of enhancing political pluralism for the sake of the growing political freedoms of the people.

It is vital not only to include the opposition in the dialogue between Belarus and the European Union, but to impose their own terms for this dialogue, and to constantly test the veracity of the authorities' liberalisation agenda, while utilising allowances for alternative activities.
At this moment the most effective method of influence is furthering the erosion of the system. In essence, everything that complicates economic and social relations within the country, erodes Presidential powers, widens the social, economic, intellectual and, if possible, political freedoms, and erodes or confuses the ideological integrity of the system, by bringing in new contradictory meanings and ideas.

This includes technical and economic cooperation, cultural connections, inclusion into the activity of various international organisations, the advance of bilateral and multilateral relations with foreign countries, traveling, civic diplomacy etc.

Erosion is also furthered by the support of the evolutionary processes within the system, even if they lead to oligarchy rather than democratisation. For example, the support of the 'dictator's privatisation' agenda, cast as dangerous by some representatives of the opposition, is in fact favourable, as it leads to the erosion of Presidential absolutism, and to the growing commitment of the country to the world economy, subsequently raising the cost of the international isolation of Belarus.

(V. Silitski ' The Draft of the Regime Salvation' 2009)

David Marples, Distinguished Professor, University of Alberta, Canada



Vitali's points remain very relevant today. He understood better than most the importance of maintaining links with Europe on a number of levels. Implicit in his remarks is the view that Belarus is less monolithic than most foreign media seem to think, even though he foresaw clearly that the way forward was to undermine in any way possible the so-called "Presidential vertical" and he did consider Belarus a dictatorship (though one can define that word in a number of different ways). The one possible caveat in the above statements is that since the 2010 presidential elections, privatisation has been conducted under conditions of severe economic stress (bringing about the urgent need for foreign loans) and in one direction only, i.e. Russian companies have had a more or less exclusive "first right" to purchase valuable Belarusian firms or to bring about mergers with them. It was one of the conditions of the $3.5 billion Eurasian Economic Community loan last year. Thus logically the task of the EU, following Vitali's suggestions, is to find means to circumvent the current impasse with Minsk in order to be in a position to take part in the future privatisation of Belarusian firms. The ending of the regime's economic power, as he surmised, will weaken its political power and result in a more pluralistic and less absolutist society.

Remembering Vitali







David Marples

I first met Vitali at a conference in Bath, England, in 1999, which was probably the first major conference on Belarus to be held in a Western country. At that time he was a translator for sociologist David Rotman, standing at the front of the stage and dwarfing the diminutive speaker, so much so that at one point, a member of the audience asked if he might stand a little further to the side, so that the audience could see the presenter. My next encounter was about a year later in a Minsk subway where he appeared from behind me suddenly, and treated me like a long-lost friend. Erudite, brilliant, and very human, he seemed both figuratively and literally "larger than life." He seemed to know everyone worth knowing in the Belarusian capital and more recently he introduced me to various ambassadors and scholars visiting his favorite café—the appropriately named—for someone as cosmopolitan as Vitali—"News Café" on Karl Marx Street. He was an exceptionally likeable and amusing man. I once saw him sleep through a panel at a conference at the Lazarsky University in Warsaw. Afterward he denied he had been sleeping despite the fact that his snores could be heard throughout the presentations. It turned out he had been socialising in the Old Town until 3 am the night before. Rarely would he miss an opportunity to discuss political issues with friends from near and far. The term 'public intellectual' is an apposite description. Although his work was his passion, and he was a brilliant analyst, free from any sort of political leanings or strong sentiments, he was very much in tune with popular culture. His great passion was Liverpool FC, the English football team, and he followed their progress from afar or on television as avidly as any fan. It is symbolic of his broad and sometimes complex personality and wide range of interests. No one who met Vitali could ever forget him. And few would seek a better epitaph.

Remembering Vitali

Pavel Daneika, Director of BEROC (Belarusian Economic Research and Outreach Center)



We met when VItali SIlitsky came to the office of the IPM Research Centre. He was still a student at that time. We started talking to each other, and our dialogue would never end.

When we had to decide who was going to become the Director of the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies, Vitali had just graduated and came back home from Stanford University. From the very start we were looking for a 'Western-minded' person, and Vitali with his Ph.D. -based professionalism, enthusiasm, and sense of mission was exactly what we needed.

He showed an outstanding level of academic analytics. Before him the analytics was either in the essay form, or was well too often ideologically biased. This was very different from scientific research, since the answer had been evident even before the actual study. Vitali would involve networks of experts into BISS's projects, which resulted in the creation of a new political circle revolving around BISS. Those people, outstanding specialists in their own right, had credibility and skills, so they could present their findings on an international level.

He was the first person with a Ph.D who had come back to Belarus and worked here. Now there are several of them, not only in political science, but in economics, too. This is an ongoing process, although after December 19th, several people have decided not to come back. Vitlali Silitski was the first Belarusian analyst with an excellent European level of professionalism.

Dr Elena A. Korosteleva Director of the Centre for European Studies



It has been a year since Vital is no longer with us… and yet, it is still hard to believe that he is NO LONGER with us, and all the short thirty nine years of his life are now history, a life which we ought to treasure.

I remember well our first years as students; so young, so open and so daring, truly in line with the zeitgeist of the time and capable of dismantling (even if for a short while) long-standing boundaries and stereotypes. Where would we normally find ourselves, after long and gruelling hours of lectures, which in retrospect were a curious mix of the history of communism and modern western philosophy? Of course, in the Leninka, on October Square - simply because the archives were released and we could read Immanuel Kant, Hegel, Lock, and Nietzsche, in their original translation, and without the helpful guidance of the Communist Party! Vital, of course, had to take it a step further, to see how all these great antinomies of democracy vis-à-vis the state could be applied in reality, walking between the tanks and bloodshed of Moscow, after the Putsch.

These ideas coupled with the sobering reality, made him an intellectual, and a fighter, who, having been educated both in the east and the west, would always want to try them out in practice, to make the world a better place.

Yet, the struggle was not between equals, and he burnt out. And we are now deprived of a formidable mind, a true Belarusian, and at the same time, a very private and kind friend, whom my son will always tenderly refer to as *Diadia Sila* - Uncle the Strong

Jeff Lovitt, Executive Director of PASOS (Policy Assosiacion for an Open Society)



Vitali will be remembered for his great intelligence, wit, and sense of humour, and as a beacon of freedom -- both in conversation and in his writings on democratisation and authoritarianism. He died at a time when civil society needed his gifts, when restrictions were being imposed on freedom of speech and movement, and three opposition presidential candidates had been given long prison sentences after the presidential elections of December 2010. Vitali's memory should serve to remind us of the many positive voices for freedom and a democratic future in Belarus. The release of Andrei Sannikau must be welcomed by all who value the human spirit, but we all know that Lukashenka is capable of taking more hostages for each one released. As if we did not need to be reminded of the regime's disregard for human rights, the sentencing of the current BISS Academic Director, Aliaksei Pikulik for "hooliganism" shows the true nature of the regime - demonstrating the continuing intimidation and harassment of positive voices for freedom and democracy.

In 2003, Vitali lost his position as Associate Professor at the European Humanities Univerisity in Minsk when the university administration acted upon the orders of the state authorities to punish him for publicly criticising the government of President Lukashenka. He went on to become a Reagan-Fascell Democracy fellow at the National Endowment for Democracy (Washington D.C.) and visiting scholar at the Centre on Democracy, Development, and the Rule of Law (Stanford University). In 2007, he was appointed director of the BISS - which joined the PASOS network in 2010.

In December 2011, in memory of Vitali, the Central European University (CEU) in Budapest announced the creation of a scholarship named in his memory. The 'Silitski Supplementary Annual Scholarship at CEU' will be open to Belarusian students attending the university, where Vitali studied before receiving his Ph.D from Rutgers University in the US.

I am convinced that those of us who knew him in Belarus, throughout Europe and the US, and everyone who cares about Belarus, will join together in our efforts to realise Vitali's own wish for which he worked so long -- to "light the candle of freedom" in Belarus.

Current Activities Update

The Clearing House Goes into Its Regional Training Phase while Belarusian Experts in Higher Education Continue to Explore the Experience of Their Colleagues from EaP Countries


Photo: democraticbelarus.eu

During May and the beginning of June, the Office for a Democratic Belarus in cooperation with its partner organisations continued the implementation of the "Clearing House" Initiative (CH) and "EU and Belarus: Sharing Knowledge" projects.

Six regional training sessions for Belarusian NGOs, intended to help increase their competencies in the development of projects and submission of applications for the current NSA-LA call for proposals, were conducted in Vitsebsk, Hrodna, Homel, Mahiliou, and Minsk with more than 120 representatives of NGOs and local authorities attending. Apart from this, Belarusian NGO members will have the chance to approach five project consultants who have been trained during the year in the frames of the CH. Our consultants will help Belarusian NGOs to clarify issues that remained unclear from the training and will assist in preparing applications for EU programmes and Member States funding mechanisms during individual or group consultations foreseen under the project. More information about the consultants will soon be published on the ODB and partner web-sites.

The "Clearing House" Initiative is a part of the "Belarus-EU Task Force" project coordinated by the Office for a Democratic Belarus in cooperation with the international consortium EUROBELARUS, Forum Sud (Sweden) and PACT Inc. with technical and information assistance by the Office for European Expertise and Communications in Minsk. The project is supported by the European Commission. The overall objective of the project is to build the organisational capacity of Belarusian civil society organisations and enhance their cooperation, while improving coordination among Belarusian civil society organisations and the European Union, European donors and international implementers.

On 3-6 June, a delegation of Belarusian specialists in higher education visited Tbilisi on a study tour. Belarusian experts attended three leading Georgian universities (Tbilisi State University, Ilia State University, and the Caucasus University) as well as NGOs working on issues of higher education to get aquatinted with the ways the Bologna principles are implemented in this country and establish contacts for future cooperation with their Georgian colleagues. The programme of the visit was designed in a way that allowed Belarusian experts to have the opportunity to receive both the official and alternative point of view on the input of the reforms conducted in Georgia. We hope that comparing the existing practices in the EU and EaP countries will facilitate the design of a better path for reforming the Belarusian system of higher education because irrespective of the existing consensus in society on the necessity to reform the system (neither the academic community, nor the students who use the system's services, their parents, employers or the state are satisfied with the current quality of the higher education), there is no single opinion on the direction the transformation of the education system should take.

Another event under 'EU and Belarus: Sharing Knowledge' project took place in Minsk. The first in the 2012 session of the 'Energy Club' conducted in cooperation with the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies and the Office for European Expertise and Communications was aimed at defining the priorities of its work for the coming twelve months. The participants identified the pool of domestic and international experts who will be involved in producing a set of recommendations for future reforms in the Belarusian energy domain.

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Politics and Society

The Belarusian Army: Armed for Moscow

By Siarhei Bohdan, Berlin

The spectre of Middle Eastern style revolts has suddenly appeared in Belarus. Colonel Uladzimir Baradach and Major Anufry Ramanovich claim to have organised military officers into launching a new form of legal and illegal struggle against the regime. Significantly, they have stated that this movement can count on the support of numerous dissidents in the Belarusian army and security agencies.

After brutal the suppression of post-election protests last year, the Belarusian ruler, speaking in a garrison, swore to use the army against the internal opposition and foreign countries. Seemingly, he had no doubts about its loyalty. Moreover, Lukashenka has also frequently boasted about the efficiency and successful development of the Belarusian army. What is the army's part in Belarusian politics?

For External Use Only

So far, Lukashenka used the army more for his foreign policy. Of course, Belarus has had no conflicts with other nations, though in 2005, President Valdas Adamkus of Lithuania made a strange and militarily threatening statement to his nation from Belarus. The Belarusian government is constantly selling Moscow the idea of Belarus' armed forces acting as Moscow's defenders.

Yet, the Kremlin cannot have the Belarusian military at its disposal so easily, as some examples demonstrate. Thus, in mid-February, President Lukashenka finally approved an agreement with Russia to establish the Single Regional System of Air Defence. The defence ministers of the two nations already signed the controversial treaty three years ago, though both governments articulated the idea of such a system in the early 2000s.

The Russian and Belarusian presidents will jointly appoint the commander of the air defence system. This effectively means that a portion of the Belarusian armed forces will be under Russian command. On the other hand, the joint air defence system costs less. And money is now the most painful issue for the Belarusian government.

Some days before signing the air defence agreement, Lukashenka asked Russia to help finance the Belarusian army. The statement provoked controversy, prompting Defence Minister Yury Zhadobin to explain that the words of his commander-in-chief were intended as an invitation to increase bilateral cooperation. The German magazine Spiegel stated that Lukashenka's request for assistance were demonstrative of Belarus "losing its autonomy step by step." In reality, Belarus does not need to maintain such a large, well-armed military in the first place – the only reason it does so is to serve Moscow.

Referring to the recent unrest in North Africa, Syria, and Iran, Defence Minister General Zhadobin declared on Tuesday that "external factors are drawing our attention to the military dimensions of state security." Zhadobin may have implied that Belarus should be vigilant because its neighbours were willing to teach it "how to live." But hardly anyone in the

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Photo by nmn.by.

Belarusian army could imagine a war against NATO. Or was Zhadobin referring to the external threats faced by another state – Russia?

Intimidate Enemies with What We Have
Military analyst Alyaksandr Alesin and other experts believe that Belarus itself does not need such a formidable military at all. Yet as Russia's staunch ally, Belarus needs its armed forces to qualify as a valuable asset to Russia's national defence. Indeed, only 300 km separate the Belarusian border from the Kremlin. Commitment to the defence of Russia's western borders is a trump card for the Belarusian government in its negotiations with Russia.

The Belarusian military looks quite modern and efficient in the context of post-Soviet nations, and it may be a valuable tool for Moscow. Indeed, the Belarusian regime is trying to increase its importance to Russia, e.g. through undertaking the functions of a "post-Soviet policeman." In summer 2011, Lukashenka proposed to use the military forces of the member states of the Russian-dominated Collective Security Treaty Organisation to suppress revolutions in these countries. It meant intervention on behalf of Moscow, masked as an "international force" and tasked with resisting pro-democracy movements in these countries.

However, as with many other assets of the Belarusian regime, the true value of the national army is difficult to assess. Officially, Belarus has a lot of military equipment but lacks the funding to modernise it. According to former Defence Minister Paval Kazlouski, only four or five of the 30 fighter planes in each of Belarus' air force regiments were actually combat-ready in 2010.

Since the summer of 2009, the Belarusian armed forces have lost seven pilots and four fighter jets and helicopters. Radio Liberty quoted a Belarusian air force pilot as saying: "We still use Soviet machines that are twenty to thirty - and in some cases even forty - years old. The government has no money to renovate military equipment, so we intimidate [enemies] with what we have".

Underpaid Soldiers
There are also questions concerning the human resources of the Belarusian military. In the 2000s, then Defence Minister Malcau began implementing a new system of brigades in the army that he had studied in Germany. This finally brought Belarus to the principle of brigade organisation in its army common throughout Europe. Russia had undertaken this reform years earlier.

The salaries of Belarusian soldiers remain discouragingly low. Presently, a lieutenant receives up to $280 per month - six to seven times less than his counterpart in the Russian army. Regime insiders also acknowledge that it is impossible to have a successful career by rising up the ranks in the army, since high-level official positions are reserved for people from state security agencies (mostly KGB) or the Presidential Security Service. Indeed, those who have served as a bodyguard to Lukashenka are almost guaranteed the rank of colonel or higher.

As a result, the most coveted places in the Military Academy are at the department of internal security forces - there are twice as many applicants as there are for the air force faculty. That seems remarkable given that internal troops are used to guard prisons, patrol the streets, and carry out policing. But these internal troops are treated better than the army because they are more vital to the regime.

Many specialists go east to serve as contractors in the Russian army. That makes the task of keeping Belarus' armed forces in good shape even more difficult. Hence, it is no wonder that as Putin steps up military spending the Belarusian leadership is hoping to get its share. Minsk knows that the Kremlin is in greater need of the Belarusian army than Belarus itself. In previous years, Belarus received indirect support for its military from Russia through generous oil subsidies that could be recycled into defence spending.

But now that Russian subsidies have been reduced, Russia needs to find other ways to keep the Belarusian army afloat. Belarusian and Russian officials like to compare such financial aid to the Belarusian army with US aid to the Israeli and Egyptian militaries.

Drift towards NATO
Close military relations with Russia are not indicative of Lukashenka's goodwill toward his eastern neighbour. As in other spheres, Lukashenka is pursuing an opportunistic policy that makes the best of Belarus' vulnerabilities. According to Dzianis Melyantsou of the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies, Lukashenka has also gradually developed military ties with NATO.

As one might expect, the Belarusian media has downplayed this cooperation with the West. While state officials like to make much fuss about military links with countries as far afield as China, they have kept silent on the cooperation with NATO. Relations have always been very practical, with minimal legal frameworks and few ceremonies.

But NATO has increasingly developed links with the Belarusian military. Under NATO's "Partnership for Peace", Belarus has reduced its armament levels. In 2004, Minsk joined NATO's Planning and Review Process, effectively requiring the Belarusian military to meet NATO standards in preparation for joint operations. The following year, Belarusian soldiers began to take part regularly in NATO exercises.

Belarus has yet to sign an agreement with NATO on sharing classified information, and it prevents Belarus from participation in some programmes. But the two sides were already cooperating in 24 different thematic areas in 2010-2011. In 2006, the government set a goal of adopting NATO weapons standards. In the past couple of years, Minsk has allowed NATO to transport cargo for its troops in Afghanistan through Belarus.

As a result of this hedging strategy, the Belarusian military may now compare its equipment, working conditions, and salaries not only to Russia, but also to NATO. It is too early to say whether Belarus is a reliable NATO partner - its army depends on Russia for equipment, spare parts, and training. But the engagement is evident - if Belarus democratises, current efforts will accelerate the transformation of the armed forces in accordance with the role that an army usually plays in a European nation.

Can Lukashenka Be Sure of the Army's Loyalty?
Despite Lukashenka's stated intention of sending the Belarusian military to suppress protests, such scenario looks unlikely. Military commentator Alexander Alesin, speaking on Belsat TV, emphasised that in his opinion, the army will not suppress any popular protests.

The recent Arab revolutions offered a gloomy lesson to the Belarusian ruler. The Tunisian army, which was as underfunded as Belarusian one, merely switched sides and assisted in ending the tyranny of the former regime. Even the Egyptian defence minister left Mubarak in the very first days of the uprising, declaring that the army was not going to intervene in politics. The minister, known as "Mubarak's poodle" had been previously at least as loyal to the Egyptian dictator as General Zhadobin is presently to Lukashenka.

Unlike the security agencies or police, the army itself is not Lukashenka's reliable ally. The government values the security agencies and the internal troops under the Internal Ministry because they are a necessary tool to keep a grip on power. Yet its apparent distrust of the army means that it never uses army units to crush protests. The army is unlikely to play a role in a political transition and it has never done so. But its personnel are an untapped source of support for change.

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Most Popular on Belarus Digest

By Yaraslau Kryvoi, London

Politics

BelarusDigest

What Is The Belarusian Regime?

The article critically evaluates the question of whether Belarusian state-run cultural and other institutions should be regarded as part of the Belarusian regime. It warns that labeling such individuals and organisations as parts of the regime, or as working with the dictatorship, may backfire. It also considers whether foreign investors who implement projects in Belarus support the regime of Lukashenka. After all, their investments can change the political economy of the authoritarian regime. Or are ordinary Belarusians, who pay their taxes to the current government, collaborating in a similar fashion? Failing to do so may result in chaos but would hardly aid the building of an efficient state, free of Lukashenka.

Changes in Belarus: The Task for the Opposition, Not Foreign Powers

Siarhei Bohdan notes that the recent release of two opposition activists is an important event but hardly a turning point for the political situation in Belarus. More than a dozen political prisoners remain incarcerated. Even if Aliaksandr Lukashenka frees all political prisoners and welcomes EU ministers in Minsk, it will not be a turning point, either.

Security

Belarus Plays the Border Security Card with the EU

Andrei Yeliseyeu analyses recent allegations that Belarus weakened border control at the Belarus-EU border in response to the EU sanctions policy. This puts in doubt Belarus' willingness to fully implement, as quickly as possible, local border traffic agreements with Western neighbours. It makes the prospect of signing a readmission agreement with the EU even more remote, which in turn makes visa facilitation impossible in the short term.

CSTO: From NATO's Enemy to Strategic Partner?

Volha Charnysh writes on new developments at the jubilee summit of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO). She notes that the organisation's goals include two potentially contradictory developments. On the one hand, they hope to enhance cooperation with the West and NATO. On the other, they are set on preventing contagion of the "Arab spring". Which of these two goals comes to dominate will have a profound impact on Belarus' future.

Economics

Belarus Resists Privatisation of Large Enterprises

Andrei Liakhovich observes that Lukashenka has regularly expressed a hope that Russia would increase the volume of its subsidies to Belarus, taking into account that the West "wants to bend" him. In 2012 the Putin administration will not revive the acute differences in its relations with Lukashenka's regime. However, Moscow is constantly sending signals that Luksahenka's respite from Russian pressure is merely temporary.

Social

Why Belarus Is Missing in World War II History

Siarhei Bohdan observes that the role of Belarus and Belarusians in WWII is often forgotten in Western Europe. Although only a fraction of Russian territory had been occupied by the Germans, Russia exploits the victory to the fullest extent possible, even now – both at home and abroad. Belarus had been the main Nazi-Soviet battleground for years, but many in the West also prefer to label Belarusian territories and its people as "Russian". It may sound simpler to them, but to Belarusians this sounds unfair to say the least.

Unknown-Belarus

Holy Abode

By Olga Loginova, New York



Saint Elisei. Photo by: Piligrim.by

Saint Elisei Lavra Abode is a solitary and miraculous place, hidden from the rest of the world by impenetrable woods and swamps. In the wintertime, pilgrims arrive there via a narrow wooden bridge, which is the only path between the big land, represented by the village Hnesichi in the Hrodna Region, and the old monastery.

When it gets warmer, the full-flowing Nioman covers the bridge, and boats serve as the only means of transportation between the two lands.

We went there at the end of December, 2009, when I was working on a documentary about hermits. The bridge was too narrow for our vehicle to cross, so we parked it near one of the cheerful little cottages sitting tightly on the river's edge.

My cameraman, Pavel, unpacked the equipment and shot the B-roll of the mighty river sleeping under the ice, while two cats observed us with a mixture of curiosity and contempt and a white whisk of smoke rose from the Abode.

Monk Evsevij waited for us on a trail. Tall and thin, with shrewd eyes and a soft distant voice - talking to the press was a burden for him, but he tried hard not to show this. (His own story of becoming a monk was very intriguing, since according to the rumours he used to be a KGB agent in his previous life).

We were walking through the frozen forest in silence; I never knew how to talk to the monks. Before getting here I long envisioned the monastery, with its thick brick walls, carved wooden chapel with a bell tower and old bearded monks praying for the salvation of the world. Those were the shots I needed badly for the documentary.

The forest got thinner. I expected to see the old walls surrounding the abode any second, but in vain. We came to a clearing, and instead of the idyllic picture I had envisaged, we saw a small chapel, a medium sized building, and a few cabins, still under construction.

- We are recovering from the bad fire that burned down our premises two years ago. We survive on donations, and now it is especially challenging, but with God's help we will be rebuilt soon.

The fire of 2007 was far from being the biggest challenge that the monastery had to deal with during its 8-century history.

In 1225, Rimunt, the son of Lithuanian Duke Traynat, abandoned his merry court life, took a new Christian name Elisey and started a solitary life in the impenetrable forests on the bank of the Nioman River (Neman River).

Perhaps, when his father Trainat took his newly born son in his hands, he could not have imagined that Rimunt's fame would come not from his military successes, but through his wonderful deeds as a meek monk.

Elisei founded a male monastery and welcomed newcomers, some of them of very noble descent. 25 years later Elisei was killed by a demon-possessed pupil. Miraculously, the pupil got cured, and the diseased Elisei was proclaimed a miracle man. The brotherhood of the monastery grew, and more and more pilgrims would come here looking for cure and spiritual guidance.

In 1329 the well-educated monks wrote the famous **Lavra Gospel**, which is now the property of the **Czartoryski** (Chartaryisky) family, who reside in Polish Krakow.
For centuries the Lavra has been the centre of the most miraculous holy place in our lands. When in 1506 the Tatars besieged the city of **Navahrudak**, and approached the monastery walls, they were met by a well-equipped army of many soldiers. The Tatars retreated, and the illusory army dissolved into thin air. After that miracle, monk Elisei was canonised and proclaimed a Saint.

That miraculous victory would not save the monastery from further disasters. In 1530 the monastery was ruined, and the remains of the Saint disappeared. Some holy fathers believe that they were hidden in the ground by the pupils, but the place of the burial is unknown.

The monks from the Lavra, as well as thousands of pilgrims arriving there to find answers and harmony, believe that although hidden, the remains of Saint Elisei are still very powerful. Another legend says that as soon as the monastery is fully rebuilt, the remains will reveal themselves to the believers.

The first attempt to restore the Abode was made around 1913, when the chapel, the pilgrims' commons and the residence building for the brothers received blessing from the Archbishop of Minsk and Turau (Turov). However, the church was again destroyed during WWI.

In 2000, the restoration started anew, and is still in progress.

Monk Evsevij finished his story. We were sitting in the church, and the dim candle light was casting shadow on the faces of the Saints looking upon us from the icons. The bell was tolling for prayer and dinner.

When we were leaving the Lavra, we met a flock of pilgrims, mostly women, who were hurrying to the Abode despite the cold weather and the late hour.

In Fact

•**Lavra Gospel** is a Belarusian manuscript which dates back to the first half of the XIV century. It was created for the Lavra Monastery and written in the Church Slavonic language. The Lavra Gospel consists of the New Testament as well as various explanatory notes made between XIV and XV centuries in the Old Belarusian and Polish languages. The book also contains 19 miniature pictures and many artistically decorated initials. It was restored in 1887 and is now stored in the library named after the Czartoryski in Krakow (Poland).

•**The Czartoryski** family **(the Chartaryiski)** were the leading noble family of the Polish-Belarusian-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the 18th century also known as the Familia. They used a modification of the Vytis or Pahonia as their arms — the traditional coat-of-arms that is currently the official arms of the Republic of Lithuania and a traditional symbol of Belarus.

•**Navahrudak (Novaharodak, Novogrudok)** is a city in the Hrodna Region of Belarus first mentioned in the Sophian First Chronicle and Fourth Novgorod Chronicle in 1044. Navahrudak was the first capital of the Great Duchy of Lithuania before the Great Duke Mindouh (Mindaugas) moved his residence to Vilnius in 1232. Today, the remains of the stone castle, so called Mindouh's Castle, built in the XIV century, are a reminder of the city's glorious past. Other architectural attractions include the Transfiguration Church (1712–23), where Belarusian-Polish poet Adam Mickiewicz born in Navahrudak was baptised, as well as the Church of St. Michael.

Belarus Headlines is a joint project of the Office for Democratic Belarus, Belarus Digest and the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies. More information about these organisations can be found on their web pages.